

The
Chronicles
of
Don Q.

The Ears of the Governor

IV.

By K.
and
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Pritchard

A new governor had lately been appointed to the prison at Castellano.

Don Hugo was a roystering blade, handsome, noted for his gallantries, and early successful in his career. In an ill-advised hour he delivered a speech in public, wherein he observed that Don Q. was a happy nickname for the brigand chief, who for so long had terrorized the district. He recounted some of his crimes, and culminated against him the penalties of the law.

All this Don Q. read in his mountain eyrie with exceeding relish. It flattered his self-esteem. The speech was fully reported in the local journal, which we may call *El Mundo*, but the sting lay waiting in the last clause: "And yet this reputed king of the mountains," concluded Don Hugo, "is, after all, a miserable wretch, poorer than the meanest ass in Spain, for he carries but one ear."

Whatever his other bodily infirmities, the bandit possessed both his ears, yet the libel was of a nature which could never be forgiven. His diseased sanity dwelt upon it with morbid growing bitterness. The slumbering devil in him awoke, tormenting him to fury.

Upon this day, which followed an interval of terrible quietness, the robbers' valley was thrilled by an excitement, hot with the double seasoning of novelty and danger. A party scouring the lower hills, according to their practice, had met with a lady—a very great lady she seemed—who far from objecting after the usual manner to being carried prisoner into the sierra, instantly demanded to be taken into the presence of the dreaded chief.

In the dusk Don Q. lifted up his head. "Do not keep peace any longer, I pray, Gaspar," he said in a sharp, sibilant voice. "What is it?"

"Lord, a senora would speak with you," stuttered the man. Don Q. paused. It must be confessed that a lady desiring an interview with him was something of a novelty.

"Good. The senora's name?" "The lady would tell you that herself, lord."

"Let her come," Gaspar turned away with relief, but the chief stopped him. "Stay, Gaspar. Make up the fire and light a torch, fix it up there behind me. I trust Gaspar you have no inconvenience the senora by keeping her waiting? I will ask her, and if—"

The silence was eloquent. A few minutes later a lady swept into the circle of light within the cave. Her face was hidden by a mantilla, but she moved with the air of acknowledged beauty, audacious and graceful.

Don Q. rose from his seat in the gloom beyond the fire and bowed. "I am the chief of the sequestradores, and the senora's very humble servant."

The words uttered in courtesy almost startled the hearer. She peered across the smoke and flames, but the torch had been set to baffle her vision.

"I have come to implore your aid," she said impulsively.

At the same instant she flung back her mantilla and disclosed her features. Don Q. gazed at her for a moment in silence. She was a golden Spaniard, dark-eyed, with a mouth like a red blossom, her somewhat cruel-looking but extreme beauty enhanced by a skin of exquisite fairness, and crowned with golden hair.

"Senora," began the soft voice after a pause, which the lady fully appreciated as a tribute to her charms, "I am permitted to ask you what name I may remember your loveliness?"

"Catalina, the Condesa." She broke off excitedly; she had an end in view, and wished to gain it without delay. "I was told that you were kind to those in distress, and would help a woman when you could."

"I rejoice that there are still some speakers of kind words under the mountains. Be at ease, Dona Castellina, my pleasure at the sight of so much beauty is only equalled by my impatience to know in what manner I can show my gratitude for the honor of this visit."

"Senor, I am the wife of the handsomest caballero in Spain, alas!"

"Ah! And the countless dwellers—" "In Castellano?" The fact was pertinent to the moment. "Be seated, senora. You are doubtless acquainted with the governor of the prison?"

The countess started slightly. "Why, yes."

"Is he not an ugly, pimply-faced fellow?" questioned Don Q.

She replied boldly, "On the contrary, he is an exceedingly handsome man."

He cut her short. "Pardon me, but are you sure? I have heard that ladies cried out at the mere sight of his smile!"

"With gratification, perhaps," she answered, and sighed impatiently.

"No, no, senora; you are surely mistaken."

"Hardly possible, Don Q. He is my husband!"

"You are then the wife of the governor Don Hugo? The chief's smooth voice vibrated slightly with some emotion. "It would envy him, if I dared."

"Or what use is beauty if it does not secure love?" she cried petulantly. "You love him?"

"Not always," with a charming pout. "At this moment?"

"At this moment I hate him!" She leant forward with a swing of her lithe body, her eyes flashing. "I heard a whisper—I suspected—I set spies—I followed him. She clasped her hands before her breast, then flung them apart with a vehement gesture of rage. "O, at this moment I could kill him!"

"Proceed, I beg of you. What have I to do with lovers' quarrels?"

"Everything, if you will help me! Yes, we quarrelled. He laughed at my tears. I vowed I would throw myself on your protection. He dared me to do so, and though I was indeed afraid (for your name is a cause for shuddering in the plains, senor, I came. He must pay a ransom for me. Thus shall he be taught to value his wife."

"Nay, senora, could not have the heart to deprive him of your charming society. Figure to yourself his anxiety!" was the unexpected reply. "You shall be sent down to Castellano tomorrow in safety."

The beautiful face darkened. "I will not go!" she cried imperiously. "I did not fancy you would side against me with my husband. Remember," with a winking glance at the thin figure in the corner, "you promised to help me."

"I have not forgotten. Yet you must go tomorrow, though your departure will leave the mountains black indeed."

"You are only a man after all!" she exclaimed angrily. "The sins of one Condesa shivered and obeyed man; perhaps you would feel less for him if you knew more of what he says of you. Only last Sunday he vowed you were a coward!"

"Don Hugo takes much upon himself

when he says that." A changed note in the low voice frightened her.

"He had an argument to back it," she ran on nervously. "He said that it was easy to terrify a helpless captive up here, when you have your men beside you. But he would wager—O, I cannot go on, senor!"

"Favor me by proceeding, senora."

The Condesa shivered and obeyed. "He wagered that alone, unbacked by your comrades—I mean followers, you would prove yourself—oh, how can I say it!"

"But you must, senora. Having gone so far I regret to insist."

"Have it then," she cried desperately. "You would prove yourself as cowardly as you are hideous!"

"Corpus of a scullion!" The ejaculation burst out with violence; then the voice resumed gently, "but even now, lady, you have left out one little particular."

"No, no," she sobbed. "I recollect no more."

"Then listen. The governor of the prison at Castellano was good enough to declare in public that I have but one ear. It is a lie, as I mean to show him. Tomorrow you will take a message from me to His Excellency Don Hugo, your husband."

"But," she ventured, "you promised to help me."

"That will I do also."

"Tell him I have a little museum up here in the mountains, to which I desire a small addition."

"Tell him further that when I come down from Castellano I shall have two ears of my own; but then when I depart, I shall have four ears, my own and his. Yes, senora; alone and single-handed, within fifteen days, I, Don Q., will come down from the mountains and stop the ears of the governor of the prison at Castellano."

"But," she cried in horror, "you have deceived me. An earless husband—how unendurable!"

"Nay, senora, he will be the more faithful, believe me."

For the eighth time the governor of the prison at Castellano muttered an angry oath. Because, for the eighth time that evening, his excellency had found his hand straying nervously to his ears.

The message of Don Q. had been faithfully brought down to him by his wife. In her presence, and, indeed, to himself during the hours of daylight, he would scoff at the threat as the absurd and empty vapors of a wretched hill thief. He was a strong man, mentally, physically, yet from that evening began to fall, and the wind moaned over sad Spain, his impressionable nature took on a more somber tint. He would start at a footfall, and his hand would rise to his ears. He cursed his imagination, he cursed Don Q., he cursed his wife, but in his heart of hearts he wished he had let sleeping dogs lie.

He remembered a hundred tales of the fierce chief, each one of which made him shudder. For Don Q. was a man of a strange, warped sense of humor, and severely one of the legends attached to his name, but glowed in lurid manifestations of this quality.

Besides, the bandit appeared to be omniscient. None ever lived to carry him false news twice. But the information was paid for with terrific lawlessness.

Above all, Don Hugo could not forget that the man's promises were all kept; that he never failed to make his acts coincide scrupulously with his threats. Up in the Boca de Lobo, the Wolf's Mouth, as the robbers' valley was called, all was going on as usual. Don Q. remained in his cave issuing orders and dealing out justice according to his own drastic code. But he was not idle. The task he had set himself was one of enormous magnitude, and any small mistake or slip could only end in supreme disaster.

Don Q.'s plan was laid out very subtly, and with the minute precision of a surgeon for his fierce heart dwelt in a frail body, and he proposed to go down single-handed to smite his enemy.

When all was ready he called up Robledo and Gaspar to the cave.

"My children," he said in his silkiest tones, "there is one under the mountains with whom it is necessary that I should deal, the governor of the prison at Castellano."

A flicker of excitement lit up the dark eyes of the men, but the chief raised his delicate yellow hand.

"I have nothing yet for you to do save to secure the quiet of my mountain. You will bring my food as usual day by day. I lay no command of silence upon you, but for no reason whatever you heed me, Robledo, for no reason whatever am I to be called forth until you see me again."

The men touched their tongues and eyes.

"That is well. Keep your oath in mind," advised Don Q. "For the story of what I am about to carry out will be told in the posadas of Spain by your children's children."

After this the quiet of death fell upon the cave. The band believed the chief to be still there, for he certainly had not passed by the sentries, who rigorously kept the only known entrance to the valley.

Don Q. had left the Boca de Lobo an entrance known to none but himself. In a lonely gorge he found waiting for him, tied amongst some high scrub, a horse saddled and bridled in semi-military fashion. During four days, whether riding downwards by devious and little known paths, or cooking his meal at sunset, or lurking in a thicket to watch the passing of guards, or dozing the dark hours through rolled in his cloak, the vision always before his eyes took the form of shapely ears of the governor of the prison at Castellano.

He was engaged upon a fantastic exploit. The difficulty of entering the governor's presence might in itself have seemed insurmountable; but all that Don Q. feared the words of the threat a plan formed in his mind.

It was evening. On the roof of the prison beside a cluster of potted palms a couple of reclining chairs had been placed in the best position to catch the cool airs from the mountains.

In one Dona Catalina yawned and fanned herself languidly, while the governor sat smoking cigarettes in the moody silence that day by day was moving upon him. Now and again he lifted his eyes and gazed across the white town and the tangle surrounding it, to the tracery of peaks and pinnacles which beyond them climbed into the pink evening sky. He had not lost his best flesh, and the frown upon his handsome brows told of ruffled nerves.

A sweet low laugh brought him to his feet. He glanced angrily at his wife.

"Again! O, my Hugo, you stare at the mountains and finger your ears as if Don Q. could stretch his long talons across from his cave and pull them off!" she laughed again with an abandon of enjoyment that came near to breaking down the restraint Don Hugo had placed upon his temper.

Not precisely. But I admit that sight of the sierra reminded me of your foolish visit up there, and naturally of that robber's most insolent message."

He replied with an air of loftiness. "This has forced me to take special steps with a view to setting an end to my career. A conclave of the principal personages of Castellano and the neighborhood is to be held in the great hall presently. An extraordinary expedition will then be sent up against him. I will probably lead it myself."

The senora rose from her seat and curtsied deeply and deliberately.

"I shall be doubly anxious about your ears then, my beloved! Don Q. is a man of his word. But, see, your guests begin to arrive!"

Spaniards, in spite of their reserve, are moved to excitement upon any subject which touches them nearly. The caballeros of the district no less than the citizens of the town were expected to find in Don Q. a topic far from conducive to calmness. However, his reputation stood with the poor; the rich, who hoped eventually to publish a book, much ill will. The room resounded with tales of the mysterious brigand. Each man could apply a different anecdote of his annoying, if not terrible, exploits, some of which dated back a score of years, some of yesterday, but almost all stamped with that distorted humor which commonly bit too deep for the surface.

The Count de Bernerla had told the story of Antonio's punishment by the brigand, and another of the hidalgos had spoken of a report that Don Q. hoped eventually to publish a book, which should take the form of an autobiography, and be enriched by a couple of appendices, the first setting forth the names of all his captives who had been ransomed, the dates of capture, amount of ransom, demanded and received, and date of release; the second appendix to be set within a suitable border of black, should contain a complete list of those whose money-value had failed to arrive, with a little note below each name detailing in what form death had met them.

Then Don Hugo, rising in his place, referred to the crowning offense of which the brigand had been guilty. He told, in fact, with certain expedient deviations from historic accuracy, the tale of his wife's journey into the mountains. That so beautiful a woman should have been kidnapped and half-frightened to death, stirred the ready Spanish chivalry, and when Don Hugo declared himself ready to administer an oath of membership to a society of vengeance, the idea was greeted with acclamation, and was about to be carried into effect when a servant disturbed the meeting.

A captain of the civil guard was in waiting below, charged to speak without delay to the governor on a matter of the highest importance.

"You will be good enough to request Capt del Pino to rest himself for a few minutes," returned Don Hugo impatiently.

"Pardon, excellency, he bade me present this." The man held out a card upon which some sentences were written.

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"Senors, Captain del Pino comes from Madrid upon business connected with Don Q."

A slender man in the uniform of the civil guard was already bowing in the doorway. His long blue cloak hung behind his shoulders, and as he raised his head, covered with dark curling hair, the assembly saw that he bore stains, not only of travel, but of misadventure by the way. His brow was bandaged, and a spatter of blood showed on his cheek.

"My business is pressing, excellency. Can I see you alone?" he said, in a low tone, which, however, carried an imperious echo.

"You have a mission connected with—" began the governor pleasantly.

"Pardon me," interrupted the courtly captain, "a secret mission, entrusted to me by the highest authority in Madrid."

"As to that you will never guess the purpose for which we are gathered here tonight."

"A matter of some responsibility and difficulty?" Del Pino's tone and graceful movement of the head were in the nature of a general compliment to the ability and position of those present.

"You may speak freely. We, my friends and I—are agreed on that subject," Don Hugo waved his hand largely. "Your mission then concerns—"

"A certain gentleman, well known not only in these parts, but throughout the whole of Spain, a certain Don Q.," added the captain quietly.

"Come, come, Senor Captain! We have less respect for the one-eyed brigand of the Boca de Lobo," laughed the governor, too busy in lighting a cigarette to notice a sudden contraction of the captain's features.

"That is true," said Del Pino, "but the rocks has troubled us too long. We were, precisely when you arrived, arranging to make an end of him."

"No doubt your plan would be successful, though it was said, in Madrid, that he had defied capture for some twenty years already, and that a score or so expeditions sent out against him had failed."

"He must be a remarkable personage. I was the more gratified, therefore, at receiving orders from headquarters to come down and deal specially with a man of such interesting antecedents."

"Can you bring yourself to conceive the last crime the fellow has committed?" Don Hugo asked.

"I am at a pause," he had the arrogance to kidnap my own wife in the last fortnight!"

Del Pino made a gesture of horrified surprise. "She must at once be rescued!" he declared.

"Make your mind easy, I pray. She is at this moment within these walls."

"I trust he treated her as a gentleman should?" Captain del Pino asked in his soft drawl.

"On the contrary, he behaved like a monster!"

"Did he lead her at ransom of course?"

"No, no; not precisely," stuttered Don Hugo. "He released her—after a few hours."

"That was surely considerate."

"Far from it! The reason of his action is obvious. I wonder it does not strike you, senor."

Del Pino gazed for an instant at the governor's air of self-complacent ruffianism and shook his head.

"You must forgive my dullness, excellency. I cannot imagine the reason."

"You killed Don Q. yesterday?" the governor almost shouted.

"Yes, excellency, and I shall be glad to have a receipt for the body," went on del Pino immovably, "according to the regulations of my corps."

The tension of the last couple of weeks was lifted from the spirit of Hugo. In the enthusiasm of his relief he flung his arms round the stonily unresponsive del Pino, and embraced him effusively on both cheeks.

"Accept our congratulations, senor. Gentlemen, let us drink to the health of this paladin, Captain del Pino!"

Which was forthwith done with many "bravos" and a hubbub of excited talk.

Del Pino's glass was filled; no one observed that he left it untouched. But he professed himself overwhelmed by their approbation; his success, he begged them to believe, was a mere matter of luck. He explained that, wishing to see the region of Don Q.'s exploits, he had left the train when approaching the mountains and ridden the remainder of the way. Thus he came by chance upon the brigand and shot him down.

"And now I would request his excellency to come with me to the cell in which the body has been placed, for the purpose of identifying it," he wound up.

A profound silence of a few seconds followed this announcement.

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By all means. Let us go without delay," Don Hugo could hardly yet credit his good fortune in thus being rid of his hunting foe. He longed to behold with his own eyes the dead face. "I shall never yet see Don Q., but they tell me the culture is unmistakable," he added.

"Absolutely unmistakable," continued del Pino.

Don Hugo led the way from the room. "You say the body is in a cell, senor? Why put a dead body in a cell?" he asked laughingly, as they went down the corridor.

The captain of the civil guard smiled slightly.

"From all that is said of Don Q., excellency, I thought it well to turn the key even on his corpse."

The governor stopped as they passed a stairway leading upward.

"My wife is on the roof—I will tell her."

Del Pino restrained him.

"Pardon, excellency, make sure of him first."

They descended to the level of the ordinary cells, then lower, to those more remote and secured dungeons reserved for the worst criminals.

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